

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANTAL RAPTURE III

I Thessalonians Four

by Ray R. Sutton

In the previous newsletters on the subject of **covenantal** rapture, I have denied the popular dispensational notion of a secret rapture, meaning the secret removal of the people of God off of the earth prior to the final coming of the Lord. I have done so on the basis of the truths of God's covenant contained within Holy Scripture.

I began my criticisms of a secret rapture by pointing out the lack of a prototype, or type, anywhere in Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. All the raptures of the Bible concern the removal of wicked people: the Flood, the Red Sea, Sodom, and so forth. In each case, these raptures take away the wicked and not the righteous.

Recently, however, someone wrote who argued that Sodom and Gomorrah were a legitimate example of a rapture. Lot was removed from the evil city and as such became a type of the rapture of the Church. I have two problems with this.

First, Lot had been unfaithful, even willing to give up his daughter to a group of homosexuals to buy some time for escape. He was unfaithful and had to be removed. Are we to assume that this is the state of the Church at the time of an alleged rapture? Where is such a notion taught in the Bible? Sure there are those within the Church who sin and fall away but the Scriptures nowhere teach that the Church as a whole apostatizes.

Second, when Lot was supposedly raptured from Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities were totally destroyed! Get the point? There was no second coming of Abraham to Sodom and Gomorrah because there was nothing to which to return. So if this scene is a type of the rapture, it's really a picture of the Second Coming, the final return of Christ because Lot's rapture brought final and total judgment on the people from which he was taken! I hardly think, therefore, that a dispensationalist would want to use Sodom and Gomorrah as a type of the rapture. It proves one return of the Lord.

The Ascensions of Elijah and Christ

Someone else has written and said – By the way, these newsletters on **covenantal** rapture have provoked more mail than any other subject on which I have written, including divorce – that the translation of Enoch and Elijah are examples of raptures in the Bible. Not really because they are examples of ascensions. Neither will work as a rapture example because they are single individuals who leave other existing believers behind. They are specifically a type of Christ's own Ascension. Elijah's ascension is the best Old Testament example.

And the sons of the prophets who were at Jericho came to Elisha and said to him, "Do you know that the Lord will take away your master from over you today?" So he answered, "Yes, I know; keep silent!" Then Elijah

said to him, "Stay here, please for the Lord has sent me on to the Jordan." And he said, "As the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, I will not leave you!" So the two of them went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went and stood facing them at a distance, while the two of them stood by the Jordan.

Now Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up, and struck the water; and it was divided this way and that, so that the two of them crossed over on dry ground. And so it was, when they had crossed over, that Elijah said to Elisha, "Ask! What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" And Elisha said, "Please let a double portion of your spirit be upon me." So he said, "You have asked a hard thing. Nevertheless, if you see me when I am taken from you, it shall be so for you; but if not, it shall not be so." Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

Now Elisha saw it, and he cried out, "My Father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen!" So he saw him no more. And he took hold of his own clothes and tore them into two pieces. He also took up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and went back and stood by the bank of the Jordan. Then he took the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him, and struck the water, and said, "Where is the Lord God of Elijah?" And when he also had struck the water, it was divided this way and that; and Elisha crossed over." (1 I Kings 2:5-14)

I have reproduced the immediate events around Elijah's ascension because they are much less familiar than those connected with Christ's ascension. Consider the parallels.

First, the most obvious parallel is that Elijah and Christ ascended into God's glory cloud. Ezekiel and the Apostle John are helpful at this point. Both saw inside God's glory cloud. Both provide enough similar observations to prove that they clearly saw the same thing. Yet, both bring out different aspects of the glory cloud, confirming that Elijah and Christ went to the same place. Elijah went up into the heavenly scene witnessed by Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1), fiery chariots and so forth. Christ was received by a cloud, what John observed in the Book of Revelation (chapters 1,4,5).

Second, Elijah gave Elisha an assurance that he would "never leave him." Shortly before Christ ascended, He said, "I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20).

Third, the Spirit was given in extra measure to Elisha. After Elijah ascended, Elisha has the power to divide and cross the Jordan River just as Elijah had previously done. After Christ ascends into heaven, the disciples are given the Holy Spirit in great fullness and they begin to perform the same kinds of miracles as Christ. The parallels are not forced; they are easy to see.

Yet, the specific relationship between Elijah's ascension and Christ's ascension is that both are an enthronement. When the kingship of the Lord is secured, great power is released on the earth. Elijah was not a king but he represented the true King, Yahweh Elohim. In the name of his King, he defied and reduced earthly rulers, especially the kings of Israel, Ahab and Ahaziah.

For example, just before the ascension of Elijah, he encountered Ahaziah. This Israelite king is presented as a sinful monarch. As the text says, "Now Ahaziah fell through the lattice of his upper room in Samaria" (11 Kings 1:2). He had fallen from above, meaning symbolically that he was no longer ruling for the Lord but for another lord, Satan. Indeed, He sent for messengers to find the false prophet, Baal-Zebub, an obvious allusion to the devil himself.

God intervened and sent Elijah, the true prophet, the Word of God. He told Elijah to intercept the messengers to the false prophet and to give them the message of the Lord, sending them back to the king. When they returned to Ahaziah, the monarch was angered and ordered the capture of Elijah. Each time the army tried to take Elijah, they were killed, one hundred soldiers being destroyed. Eventually God sent Elijah back to Ahaziah on His terms, telling the king that he would die. The point: God is king; He rules and his prophets represented His Lordship to the king and the people. Thus, after Ahaziah dies, Elijah is translated into heaven, signifying the new reign of the Lord.

When Christ ascended into heaven, He was being enthroned Himself. He had become the newly coronated monarch of heaven and earth. As a result, all power was released and the downfall of all empires began, especially the Roman Empire. Thus, the removal of Enoch, Elijah, and Christ, are ascensions not raptures, speaking of the glorious victory over death, the world, and the devil, as well as proving conclusively that no such concept of a secret rapture exists in the Bible.

I have not only pointed out the absence of solid Biblical precedents for any notion of a rapture, but I have tried to make one simple point: Since God deals covenantally with His people, there should be a covenantal reason for the rapture. Assuming the dispensationalist's view of the rapture means God has broken His promises to His people. Peter says that the promise given to Abraham extends to the New Covenant people (Acts 2:39). On the one hand, if the Church becomes so weak or Satan becomes so strong that the Church has to be raptured, a kind of Lot scenario, then the promises failed and there is no covenantal reason for a rapture. On the other hand, if the Church is successful on the earth, seeing the world brought to Christ as the postmillennial view advocates, there will be no need for a rapture as defined by the dispensationalists. Again, there would be no covenantal reason.

Now, does all this mean that I don't think the people of God will ever be removed from the earth? No. In our final study on covenantal rapture, I will consider the locus classicus for the rapture according to dispensationalists, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:10. I will demonstrate, however, that it refers not to some secret removal of the saints but to the final judgment day of history, the Lord's Day, when the people of God will briefly be lifted from the earth to meet their glorious Lord in the sky and then return to earth with Him in victory.

The Covenantal Structure of 1 Thessalonians

Most Pauline letters follow the simple covenant structure. The Apostle usually begins with an introduction, declaring the Lord of the covenant and his relation to Him (Transcendence). He follows often with a prayer of intercession (Hierarchy). He next stipulates certain command-

ments to be kept or that are being broken (Ethics). He then speaks of judgment or other sanctions on the immediate congregation or the world to come (Oath). Finally, he nearly always concludes with greetings to specific individuals in the congregation, creating a bond or continuity between him and them (succession). 1 Thessalonians is designed as just such a covenant.

Transcendence (1:1):

The preamble is quite short in this letter. Paul simply introduces himself and two others as standing with him in the sending of this letter. He is probably using a multiple witness principle. He does not stand alone in the Church in the things he has to say. More important, however, he makes certain to state that he sends the letter "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1:1). He, like Moses, does not send this letter on his own initiative. He sends it as Revelation from God.

Hierarchy (1:2-3:13):

In suzerain covenants, a historical prologue section often follows the preamble, rehearsing the history of the covenant relationship. Paul does precisely this. He begins by mentioning the prayers that have been prayed for the Thessalonians (1:2-10), good pastoral and covenantal practice. He wants the Thessalonians to know that he as the apostle of God has been praying for them; they are not left alone in their growth as a church; they are part of a bigger church that has intercessors around the world. He also, however, wants them to remember the previous covenant relationship, one that has begun in prayer before God. He does this for a very good reason: the people of God need to know that their leaders are praying for them.

Paul next reminds the Thessalonians of his pastoral practices (2:1-12). He came to them in integrity and love. He was gentle among them, becoming as a "father" and "nursing mother" (2:7). Why does Paul do this? The people of God are often forgetful of what their leaders have done for them. They need their memories refreshed so that they see the full sweep of a pastoral relationship that through the ups and downs has stuck with them in their problems.

Paul additionally tells the Thessalonians how he provided a successor for ministry (3:1-10). Ministerial relationships must come to an end. God calls His servants elsewhere. But, part of the test of pastoral service is the man who is left or sent to succeed the previous pastor. For the Thessalonians, that man was Timothy.

Ethical Stipulations (4:1-12):

The Apostle moves to a section of stated commands to be kept by the Thessalonians. He pushes them to "excel still more" (4:1). When he does, he touches the commandments of God in general and perhaps the first three or four that primarily focus man's relationship with God. He deals with the pastoral problem of complacency, spiritual complacency. He reminds them of the dynamic character of the Christian life, one that never stands still but always keeps moving one way or the other, either forward or backward.

In addition, he lists several other commands of the second half of the Ten Commandments. They follow a definite order.

Seventh Commandment: He begins with the seventh commandment regarding sexual immorality (4:5).

Eighth Commandment: He then refers to the eighth commandment regarding theft when he says, "That no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things" (4:6).

Ninth Commandment: The Apostle next touches on

the ninth commandment, concerning the bearing of fates witness, by telling the Thessalonians to, "lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands" (4:11). He knows that work and a quiet life keep people out of the affairs of others, and this in turn avoids things being said that are not an accurate witness of a person's character or behavior.

Tenth Commandment: The Apostle closes on the note of the final commandment when he says, "so that you may behave properly toward outsiders and be in any need" (4:12). In other words, if the Thessalonians get to work, then they will not be tempted to envy or covet those on the outside of the faith. Work and a quiet life is the antidote for coveting the things of the world!

With these commandments, the Apostle Paul turns to a very different subject, judgment.

Oath/Sanctions (4:13-5:12):

The subject of this section is judgment, sanctions at the end of the world, which falls into the oath segment of the covenant sequence. The Apostle Paul speaks of the final coming of the Lord, and as we shall see, not the secret rapture of the Church.

In any event, Paul speaks to pastoral concerns touching on the return of Christ and not so much theological ones, although he definitely makes a theological statement; pastoral comments make theological statements and theological points lead to pastoral views. What is Paul's pastoral concern?

First, keeping the previous context in mind, as well as other comments that are made in the second epistle to these same people, the Apostle addresses apathy, even laziness within the congregation. He has observed that for some reason they are not working as they should. Notice that just prior to this section on the Second Coming, he tells the Thessalonians to work and lead a quiet life (4:11). In his second letter to them he says,

If anyone will not work, neither will he eat. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread (II Thessalonians 3:10-12).

Paul is not addressing the individual who is working but not able to do as well as he desires on the job, or even the man who is not happy with his calling, and certainly not the man who has not yet found his calling. He is talking about the man who will not work at all for whatever reason.

But, in the context of the passage in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul has to be making some kind of connection between work and the Thessalonian attitude regarding the Second Coming. In short, he indicates that a lazy attitude has taken over the congregation because it thinks the Lord is going to return soon, an "I don't have to work because Jesus is coming soon" kind of attitude. Someone has called this, "rapture fever."

It has seen the same kind of disposition take over many an evangelical. I personally know of a family where the man has excellent skills but will not work because he believes he needs to be doing the work of a "prophet," telling as many people as he can about Jesus before the rapture occurs, which he believes is very soon. Sounds good to some, perhaps, but anyone to whom this sounds good needs to talk to his wife. They have moved from one place to another around the country and been reduced to beggars. In my opinion, this man is a classic violator of the commands of Paul to the Thessalonians, the apostle's pas-

toral concern regarding the Second Coming of the Lord.

Paul's second pastoral concern reaches out to a need among the Thessalonians. They were genuinely concerned about those who have died in Christ first. They are not sure what their status will be because they have believed that anyone who is not alive at the return of the Lord will not be able to go with Him. Paul corrects this notion by pointing out that the dead in Christ rise first (4:16).

Paul concludes the oath segment of the covenant to the Thessalonians by telling them no one knows when Christ will come (5:1-10). They had obviously become so involved in expecting the immediate, dare I say "imminent," return of the Lord that they had become preoccupied with issues relating to it. Paul turns them away from this focus.

Succession (5:11-28):

Paul gives final admonitions, just as Moses had done shortly before his death. As a matter of fact, Paul is probably close to the end of his life. He gives final greetings and a benediction, transferring to them the ministry he has had in their midst.

Thus, the letter to the Thessalonians is a covenant document. So what? Why did the Apostle and others in the New Testament use a covenantal approach in their letters? Remember, Paul was an apostle. This was not just any old friendly letter he was writing. He wrote with apostolic authority dealing with real spiritual problems in the congregation. More importantly, given our understanding of the covenantal nature of how he wrote, he communicated this epistle (and others) covenantally, meaning he wanted them to be renewed in their covenant relationship with God. He desired for them to correct those things that they were doing because he saw in them, as their faithful pastor, the potential for spiritual (covenantal) destruction. He did not simply want them to read the letter(s) and theologically dissect them. He hoped that they would be renewed by moving from the covenant epistle to covenant renewal. In summary, he feared the covenant was about to be broken and he spoke in such a covenantal manner as to remind them of the need to prevent covenant-breaking.

Now, having provided the covenantal context of Thessalonians, let us move to the details of I Thessalonians 4:13-5:10, specifically considering whether this passage addresses the alleged secret rapture or the final coming of Christ.

Rapture or Second Coming?

I was taught by dispensationalists that the I Thessalonians 4:13-5:10 passage is the only text in the Bible that conclusively teaches a rapture. For certain, they tried to build a case on the alleged difference between "appearing" and "coming." But this is not my concern at this point. Besides, other authors such as Marcellus Kik and Loraine Boettner have adequately dealt with the inherent problems of using these words to build a rapture case. As a matter of fact, a leading dispensational theologian, in my opinion the best ever produced by their movement, once told me that Loraine Boettner's criticisms of dispensationalism, and particularly its attempt to use the words "appearing" and "coming" to prove that the two are different events, offer an "irrefutable refutation that no dispensationalist has ever countered." So, my concerns will be with the Thessalonians passage.

I believe that I Thessalonians 4:13-5:10 describes one event, the final return of our Lord. The key to the dispensationalist's case that this passage describes the rapture is in proving that I Thessalonians 4:13-18 and I Thessalonians 5:1-10 are talking about two different events. I Thessalonians 4 is describing the rapture and I Thessalonians 5 is speaking about the second coming. This is categori-

cally wrong for two reasons.

First, Greek grammar will not allow such a division. Keep in mind that the chapter divisions are not inspired by God. In the original manuscripts, therefore, the reader would not have seen a chapter marker between the two chapters. He (she) would have simply read straight into the fifth chapter, which begins with a specific Greek connection, *peri de*, normally translated, "Now as" or "Now concerning." The issue is the following: Is this connection a logical or chronological one? The Greek language virtually always uses *peri de* as a logical link and hardly ever as a chronological one.¹ Notice the very language of the verse. These words speak of that which precedes: "Now as to the times and epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you." "Times and epochs" of what? Because this use of "*peri de*" is a logical connector, "times and epochs" refers back to the previous subject, meaning the Apostle moves to the issue of timing. More significantly for our present concerns, however, it means he is describing one and the same event. He is only referring to a different issue not a different event.

Paul uses language in I Thessalonians five that is virtually straight from the gospels. He says,

For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, 'Peace and safety!' then destruction will come upon them suddenly like birth pangs upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that the day should overtake you like a thief (5:2-4).

Now compare this with Jesus' clear reference to the Second Coming in the Gospel of Matthew when He says,

Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone. For the coming of the Son of Man will be just like the days of Noah. For as in those days which were before the flood they were eating and drinking, they were marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and they did not understand until the flood came and took them all away; so shall the coming of the Son of Man be. Then there shall be two men in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left. Those women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken, and one will be left. Therefore be on the alert, for you do not know which day your Lord is coming. But be sure of this, that if the head of the house had known at what time of the night the thief was coming, he would have been on the alert and would not have allowed his house to be broken into. For this reason you be ready too; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will (Matthew 24:36-44).

How can the text be any more obvious? Paul is referring to precisely the same event as was Jesus. There is no such thing as a secret rapture. There is only one and final return of Christ. The saints of God, living and dead, will not be removed before then, bringing us to a second argument against a divided text approach to I Thessalonians.

1. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 616-619; 1183-1185.

Second, Paul uses Gospel language in the I Thessalonians four passage, the one that allegedly teaches a rapture, that teaches one return of the Lord. Paul says, "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (4:16). The reference to "voice of an archangel" simply means that Jesus' voice will sound like that of an archangel, probably a reference to the booming sound. But the point is that Jesus will cause these resurrections by His voice.

Now, keep in mind this Pauline language, comparing it with that which Christ used to describe the same event.

Truly, truly I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment (John 5:24-29).

Christ clearly says that His voice is going to raise up **everyone**. He says all. The only significant difference between Christ and Paul is that the latter says the "dead in Christ" will rise first to meet the living believers in the air with Christ. But, when does this occur? Jesus says, "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (John 6:54). There simply cannot be two comings of Christ. There is only one and this is the final judgment day!

Thus, the 1 Thessalonians passage speaks of the second coming and not of the rapture. For certain, the saints of God will be caught up into the air to be with Christ, but their "meeting" is referred to by a Greek word (*apantesin*) used to describe how the leaders of a city would meet an approaching dignitary to escort him to the city.² This removal of the saints is only to turn around and come back for the final Judgment Day. It is not a secret; "there is too much noise," as someone has said. And, when it happens, it is end that leads to the beginning of eternity with Christ, that is, if one has been known by Him! This is the Biblical, **covenantal** rapture of the Bible.

I conclude this three-part series on **covenantal** rapture by re-stating my thesis in each part: The Bible nowhere teaches a secret rapture of the people of God apart from the final coming of Christ! The astounding thing to me is that so many Christians have believed rapture theology without clear Biblical proof. Dispensationalism lacks and always has lacked clear exegetical proof for its position. Their followers, therefore, are sheep without exegesis, explaining why they are addicted to current-events-based eschatology. Until they return to the plain sense of Scripture and abandon this Chicken-Little-theology, they will always be addicted.

2. F. F. Bruce, *World Biblical Commentary: 1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Waco, Texas: Word Publishing Company, 1962), p. 102.